The Boy Who Would Be King: Court Revels of King Edward VI, 1547–1553

Suzanne Westfall

In the mean season, because there was a rumor that I was dead, I passed through London.¹

Many have commented on the coldness of the entries in the diary of the boy-king Edward VI, but few seem more chilling than this one (dated 23 July 1549). Partially because rumors were continually circulating about the precarious health of the king (rumors which were, shortly, to become fact), and partially because Londoners saw the young king far less frequently than they had watched his flamboyant father, the king’s body was always a subject of concern. Indeed, at King Henry’s death when the duke of Somerset took physical possession of the prince’s body in order to ensure his own power, the performance of the “Protectorate” era began. Show the king, show the power. So when Edward needed to assure his people that his government was still functioning, his councillors put him on parade.

The connections between aristocratic and royal patrons and the entertainments that they actually produced have been of increasing interest to theater historians during the past ten years. The Records of Early English Drama (REED) project has revealed hundreds of financial accounts that establish the quantity and frequency of patron theater, and we are now beginning to consider the aesthetic and organizational relationships between patrons and their revels. Do patrons, as does Theseus in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, actively choose their ludi for specific reasons—taste, novelty, politics? Do patrons, as does Hamlet, actively interfere with texts? Do patrons, as does Don Vermandero in The Changeling, order up the local “madfolk” to dance for a three-day
wedding celebration? For years, we have assumed that the nobility of early modern England retained entertainers as a sign of sophistication and wealth. We have assumed that the nobility retained entertainers in order to promulgate political or religious ideologies. We have assumed that the nobility retained entertainers because they were genuinely interested in the arts. We have assumed that they retained entertainers because they needed spies, messengers, processional fanfare, and martial signal corps. And we have evidence to support all of these assumptions, either all together or singly.\(^2\)

Increasingly in the last decade, patronage studies have become more important and more interesting. Interdisciplinary methodologies combined with the groundbreaking work of REED and the second-generation applications of the records are reconfiguring the geography of early English drama. As we shift our critical lenses from texts to contexts, we find that the culture and the stage inform each other, and that cultural studies can help us approach, if not recover, sixteenth-century theater. It is difficult enough to understand the complexities of patronage in our own time, almost impossible to conceive of largesse in the sixteenth century. We find it almost impossible to represent the past accurately because we must constantly strive to recover it from within the prisons of our own paradigms. Nevertheless, bearing in mind Foucault's cautions against "presentism," I would like to examine Edward's revels, ultimately to compare his patronage to that of the other Tudors.

Like all of the Tudors, Edward VI was surrounded by the "stories, ceremonies, insignia formalities and appurtenances" that Clifford Geertz suggests define and justify our cultural status and relationships.\(^3\) But Edward's narratives and icons differ from those of the rest of his family—differences that lead me to suggest ways in which the idiosyncrasies of a particular personality shaped the aesthetics of court theater.

Clearly, specific information about a patron leads to more responsible conjectures about his or her motivations for maintenance. Consequently, as a "case study," I choose King Edward VI for a variety of obvious reasons. His rule was short and has often been ignored by historians, who consider him, with his sister Mary, as rather thorns between two Tudor roses—the sad remnant of Henry or the ragged
rehearsal for Elizabeth; he acceded to the throne of England as a nine-
year-old boy; he was, or definitely became, a radical Protestant by incli-
nation and influence; and he authored the only autobiographical jour-
nal in Plantagenet, Tudor, or Stuart eras—the first "diary" in England,
extcept for perhaps Margery Kempe's more problematic *Booke*. It seems
to me that Edward is unique, and that his revels might be more easily
distinguishable from those of his profligate father and those of his older
(and extremely dissimilar, both to him and to each other) sisters. Presu-
marily, the entertainments produced in "the boisterous atmosphere
of the household of a young king on the verge of his majority," as John
Murphy has called the era, would be distinctive.

The disadvantage to examining Edward's reign is that he was not
always reigning. The dukes of Somerset and Northumberland did a fair
amount of meddling; in a sense, much of his reign was an interregnum as
truly as was Oliver Cromwell's. In addition we cannot assume—as we cannot
assume with any aristocrat—that Edward chose his entertainments per-
sonally. We do know some of the chief suspects: Sir Michael Stanhope,
Lord Chamberlain and First Gentleman of the Privy Chamber, was finan-
cially responsible for the Revels and court ceremonies; Thomas Cawarden
and George Ferrers, Lords of Misrule for two years of the most extrava-
gant Christmas entertainment, took active roles in the composition and
design of Edward's revels; and quite likely the privy councillors around
the young king also had their fingers in the revels pie, since, as David Starkey
has pointed out in his political study of the English court, during Edward's
reign there was no "institutional [or] geographical distinction between
court and 'government'. The King's court was the government"—further
evidence for the performative nature of the king's person and his entou-
rage, of the doubling of the actors on private and public stages. Conse-
quently, we should expect the Privy Council, who were also the chief
gentlemen of the Privy Chamber, to be well informed if not in charge of
the young king's leisure activities.

In order to analyze Edward's revels, I have begun to construct a court
calendar—a day-to-day record of what Edward did, where he traveled,
what he learned and heard—in an attempt to understand the relationship
between taste and patronage. Instead of examining Edward's daily rou-
tines (which in and of themselves suggest an intelligent child with a
variety of physical, intellectual, and aesthetic interests), I will explore a few instances of the intersection of the boy-king’s tastes with his court’s polemics.

As the cherished and long-awaited heir to the throne, Edward kept a princely household. Practically from birth, he “retained” entertainers, clearly supplied initially by his father and later inherited from him. We know that as a four-year-old he danced to the music of his own company of minstrels,6 for in 1542 his sister Princess Mary rewarded “the Prince’s minstrels.”7 He kept his own menagerie, managed by John Allen, yeoman of the prince’s beasts, who staged fights and bear baiings once a month,8 a “sport” for which the king demonstrated a lifelong taste. Edward indulged himself in what might be considered the less sophisticated, more childish entertainments.

As a child, Edward, like all noble youth, was taught “tilting” and “running at ring” (his personal favorite, though his journal records his petulance at not being very good at martial arts). Leisure time was filled with hawking, tennis, cards, chess, and backgammon, though his schoolmaster Roger Ascham later prohibited his expensive gambling; Edward mimicked his teacher by chastising his sister Mary about her betting as well.9 Henry hoped that his son would be his replica in musical composition, so he hired a Flemish musician, Philip van Wilder, to teach singing, dancing, and lute playing.10 Edward also studied the usual French, Latin, and Greek, which by age six he could translate and compose—a skill that by today’s standards seems amazing, but which was not uncommon in the sixteenth century (certainly Elizabeth accomplished the feat).11 In Edward, then, we have the model of a noble youth, skilled in the social and intellectual arts.

Edward’s reign, with its Byzantine plot, began with his father’s death in the early hours of 28 January 1547, marked by one of theater history’s favorite records: Stephen Gardiner, the bishop of Winchester, complained to Secretary of State Sir William Paget that he “intends to have a solemn dirge and mass for the late King. At the same time the players in Southwark are to have a solemnne play to trye who shal have most resorte, they in game, or I in ernest,” and requests the Lord Protector to prohibit the players.12 Here again, the performance of the king’s body, in this case Henry’s corpse, is considered “resort,” analogous to a piece of
theater. Prince Edward would, of course, have had nothing to do with this escapade, but the altercation in the Privy Council seems to demon-
strate that the reaction to Henry VIII’s death was not universal grief. It also reveals that from the very beginning of Edward’s short reign, adult
forces were using theater to express and affect opinions.

After a brief episode in which adults demonstrated their power by
taking physical possession of the new king—by displaying him as an
icon of kingship (a gambit that was to be twice repeated with lethal
results for the Seymour brothers in 1549)—Edward’s coronation cer-
emonies were ordered for Shrove Sunday, 29 February 1547. Accord-
ing to the Spanish ambassadors, there was “no very memorable show of
triumph or magnificence,”13 which seems an odd comment when one
reads the coronation description and verses.14 At first glance, it seems
likely that the Spaniards were being disingenuous: from the time of the
prince’s birth, they had been regularly writing of his poor health and
imminent demise, presumably to play to the hopes of Mary’s Spanish
and Catholic supporters. But a closer look reveals that the Spanish ob-
servers were, to some degree, accurate; Edward’s coronation entertain-
ments were actually a hodgepodge of verses and pageants, hastily stitched
together from a one-hundred-year-old series that John Lydgate had writ-
ten for another boy-king, young Henry VI.15

Perhaps the Revels Office, caught unaware by the precipitous events
of Henry VIII’s demise and his son’s abduction and subsequent ascen-
sion, simply relied on a script that they had in hand; certainly the office
was known throughout the reigns of the Tudors for recycling pageant
vehicles and costumes from one event to the next. Similarly, civic and
guild authorities paid for storage of their own pageant supplies, which
could be refurbished and reused when necessary. But perhaps the
Revels Office intentionally selected to echo the coronation of Henry VI
to stress the continuity of kingship, the precedent of minority kingship,
and to refer to the smooth transition (at least until the York family took
up arms thirty years later) between the glorious reign of Henry V and
that of his young and, to many reports, saintly son. On the other hand,
the model of a child-king who lost control of the French territories his
father had won—who, like Edward, was manipulated by his nobles and
even his strong-minded wife, Margaret of Anjou—was perhaps not a
comforting thought for Londoners. The theatrical allusions and historical parallels that reverberate between the two pageant series certainly merit further scrutiny.

The five-hour procession from the Tower to the Palace of Westminster is stuffed with the traditional and somewhat unoriginal figures typical of such events. The magnificent procession—led by the king in white and gold, bedecked with diamonds and pearls, and accompanied by his ubiquitous Privy Council and several thousand soldiers—marched through the crowded streets, hung with arras and cloth-of-gold, with the traditional wine running in place of water through the conduits. Perhaps there were more child actors than usual, but the allegorical figures are conventional: St. George; two loyal brothers from romance, Valentine and Urson (the latter clad as a wild man, a figure that would recur with regularity in Edward’s court revels); Grace, Nature, Fortune, and Charity; several Liberal Sciences; and Regality, Justice, Mercy, and Truth. Somewhat more specific allusions to Edward appeared in a fight of phoenixes (symbol of the Seymours, prophetically to Jane Seymour’s death while giving birth); with the assistance of crowned lions, representing no doubt King Henry, the phoenixes defeated fire-belching serpents, probably representing Catholic forces. Politically specific orations in Latin and English had been planned, but because the procession was late, it hurried by without hearing the texts that referred explicitly to King Edward VI.

Two occurrences during the procession show us the honest reactions of the young king. At the Cross in Cheapside when the mayor presented Edward with a purse containing a thousand crowns, the little boy peeped forth from the bejeweled golden king; Hume reports that the boy, confused, asked, “Why do they give me this?” With some difficulty, Edward took the heavy purse, but had to pass it to the captain of the guard, for it was much too heavy for him to hold. In spite of the fact that the procession had run seriously overtime, at St. George’s Church King Edward ordered the procession to stop so that he could watch a tumbler walk a tightrope stretched from the steeple of the church to the ground—a delay “which stayed the kings Majesty, with all the train, a good space of time.” Within the circumscribed (and derivative) structure of the coronation pageant, it seems Edward was already making a space for himself and his tastes.
The next day, with the usual twelve-hour coronation ceremony reduced to a more manageable seven—again presumably because of the young age of the protagonist—Edward again showed his mettle: walking from the Abbey to the Hall for the banquet, he inquired about the three swords borne before him and was informed that they represented his three kingdoms. “One is wanting—the Bible, the sword of the spirit,” he is said to have commented, and ordered the sword taken from the lectern and borne before the other swords to symbolize the supreme power of the spirit over the earthly powers. Although this smacks of apocryphal Protestant posturing, it certainly matches in tone Edward’s own rhetoric in his journal.

At the banquet, the assembled company enjoyed music, trumpet fanfare, and theatrical challenges by noblemen on horseback to whom-ever might deny Edward’s legitimate claims, which of course no one was scripted to take up. Nevertheless, the usual jousts and tournaments took place on Tuesday, followed by “farses” and “a goodly enterlude played in the said hall, where was also made a mounte with the story of Orpheus right conyngly composed.” The Masque of Orpheus staged that evening does not seem inordinately child-friendly, though the sermons preached later were made to fit, and in these the king was compared specifically to youthful religious heroes such as David, Samuel, Solomon, and Josiah, who were known, like Edward, for acceding to thrones at tender ages and for religious reforms. The Revels Accounts also record expenses for the sort of entertainment we should expect from the newly empowered Protestant authorities—an anticlerical and antipapal masque. Cardinals’ hats, priests’ capes, white garments for monks, “Crownes and Crosse for the poope in playe” are listed, and the records imply that Edward himself played a priest; here Edward resembles his father, who often donned costumes and took part in theatrics, rather than his sisters, who preferred to play the part of audience.

Similar Protestant propaganda-inspired masques took place at Christmas in 1547 and 1549. Edward’s first Christmas revels included a masque of Prester John and a tower of Babylon, both subjects appropriate to the Reformation. The latter, Albert Feuillerat suggests, may have been Edward’s own lost play, De Meretrice Babylonica. Certainly the tradition of moral debates in theatrical form is an old one in England, particularly at Oxford.
and Cambridge. But the king’s authorship argues for a familiarity with the structures and conventions of the drama as well as a personal taste for rhetorical composition that we find confirmed by Edward’s religious writings.

After Edward’s coronation, there were few changes in government or in maintenance as the council tried, at least initially, for continuity rather than disruption of Henrican policies. New Year’s rewards during Edward’s first regnal year suggest that he inherited most of his father’s entertainers; even royal barbers remained on the payroll for the beardless nine-year-old, and Henry VIII’s favorite court jester, Will Somers, remained Edward’s royal fool, appearing throughout the reign. Edward continued his father’s patronage of the obligatory trumpets, drums, “still” minstrels, and viols, but he also hired new sackbuts and another troupe of six viols (he also received a viol as a gift). He rewarded William More, the “Quenes harper,” his organmaker Beaton, as well as his “pleyers of enterludes.” The “Kinges newe mynstrelles, who was with his grace when he was Prince,” included Hugh Pallard, Edward Lake, Thomas Alee, Thomas Curson, Edward (or Robert) May, Allan Robinson, and Thomas Pagington. Richard Bower served as master of the King’s Chapel. Other minstrels include “Guilliam du Warte, Guillam de Trosse, and Petie John” who received £4 rewards, perhaps as visitors, as their French names imply. A reward to one family—“Lewes de Bassiam, Anthony de Bassiam, Jasper de Bassiam, John de Bassiam, and Baptist de Bassiam”—is likely to the Bassano family (since their forenames are identical), the renowned recorder-players that Henry VIII had “bought” from Europe for the price of the dissolved monastery of Charterhouse and a monopoly on Gascon wine.

Like his father, Edward appears to have performed in his own revels, at least once at Shrovetide 1548 as a Moor (with black hose and gloves, and perhaps in blackface, as Queen Anne would later do in Jonson’s masque of blackness), and once as a priest. In the Christmas revels of 1551 the accounts mention a “devye by the kinge for a combat to be foughte with Wylliam Somer”—though whether the king designed the masque (“a devye by the kinge”; my emphasis) or acted in it remains unknown. He was, of course, a political performer from an early age; when Somerset kidnapped him from Hampton Court to Windsor in 1549, Edward complained vociferously and staged an ill-
ness that disappeared abruptly (some said miraculously) with Somerset's arrest.26

Edward's lessons frequently took allegorical form almost reminiscent of Redford's *Wit and Science* or a Surrey Petrarchan sonnet. Edward's tutor, Dr. Cox, finding his pupil lethargic, set up lessons as battles: the parts of speech were the defenders that surrendered and became the prince's "subjects and servants," whereupon the army began to tear down the castle of Latin nouns and verbs and build them up again. Eventually, though, Edward lost interest in grammatical wars, and Cox found himself faced with "Captain Will": "At Will I went, and gave him such a wound that he wist not what to do [i.e., Cox slapped the prince], but picked [himself] privately out of the place [so] I never saw him since. Methought it the luckiest day that ever I had in battle. I think that only [one] wound shall be enough for me to daunt both Will and all his fellows." Subsequently, teacher and pupil switched to tournament allegories (perhaps due to the prince's taste for running at ring and tilting), where "another cumbrous captain, called Captain Oblivion ... appeareth out of his pavilion" and by "labour and continuance of exercise" was "chased away."27 While Roger Ascham's own *The Schoolmaster* discourages fantasy and romantic storytelling—including Malory and Chaucer—Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Governor*, a popular primer for aristocratic education, contains many allegories such as this and was quite likely one of Cox's educational inspirations. While Edward may indeed have become literal-minded from a dearth of "literature," clearly he, like the rest of his family, was expert in inferring allegorical meaning from an early age and seems to have responded enthusiastically to its use—a practical talent in court revels.

At Edward's accession he formed the King's Players, probably simply upgraded from the prince's players and combined with Henry's interluders. At Mary's accession, his players (George Birche, Richard Cooke, Richard Skinner, John Birch, Thomas Sowthey, and John Browne) became hers; two players in the Edwardian records (Robert Hynstock and Henry Harryot) disappear by 1553, and Cooke, Sowthey, and John Birch vanished after 1556. Edward had appointed these last three players, along with Skinner and Browne. George Birch had been appointed under Henry.28 The fact that William Hunnis, Gentleman of
the King’s Chapel, Thomas Cawarden, Master of the Revels, and the latter’s assistant Sir Thomas Benger were staunch Protestants all implicated in plots against Queen Mary²⁹ argues that continuity, in spite of polemics and plain common sense, remained the Tudor family style.

Sydney Anglo, in his analysis of Edward’s court revels, uses the adjectives “dismal” and “dreary,” and indeed the low budgets and repetitious accounts for Moors, Irishmen, and hobbyhorses do seem to indicate a failure of the imagination. But other explanations are also compelling. Since Edward’s revels appear limited to Christmas and Shrovetide, it seems plausible that a young boy with extensive studies, few sociopolitical responsibilities (he was, supposedly, already engaged to the infant Mary Stuart), delicate health, and an early bedtime might not be as garrulous as his father had been—or that his religious persuasions might, like an early Puritan’s, dictate playing during traditional “carnival” times only.

I might also suggest that those responsible for entertainment at court really were trying to suit the revels to the king’s taste, and that his taste might be for physical action and exotic effects rather than for subtle aesthetics, though Edward’s journal and his training certainly indicate that he would have no trouble interpreting classical or, especially, biblical allusions. Edward’s frequent parades of Irishmen might reflect his love for two of his schoolfellows: the young earl of Ormonde and Edward’s best friend Barnaby FitzPatrick (Edward’s “whipping boy” probably in legend only, since his schoolmaster Cox did not hesitate to strike him). The son of the Irish baron of Upper Ossory, FitzPatrick grew close to the prince as a “hostage” at the English court; Edward carried on an affectionate and spirited correspondence with FitzPatrick, who remained at the French court for an entire year at Edward’s expense. Or perhaps the wild Irishmen reflect a child’s fondness for boymen, since the “wild man” figure had been and continued to be popular in many disguisings and folk festivals.

Not least, the gloomy economics of Edward’s reign might also have dictated some belt-tightening from the egregious excesses of his father. As Anglo points out, “[t]he whole dismal series comprising four years of revelry [from the coronation through Shrovetide 1551], cost less than many single pageant entertainments presented in the early years of Henry VIII’s reign.”³⁰ Histories frequently claim that the prince was kept on a
tight financial leash; according to his uncle, Lord Admiral Thomas Seymour (who had an ax of his own to grind, and used the prince’s appetite for gambling to manipulate him, that is, by ingratiating himself by lending his nephew spending money), Edward was “brought up like a ward and had a beggarly appearance.” Stanhope, who managed the Privy Purse, kept the king’s allowance small so that Edward was only too happy to accept money from his uncle. After the executions of the Seymour brothers, from May to October 1552, Edward undertook the only extended progress of his reign through Hampshire to the south coast, supposedly because his court was on the verge of bankruptcy.31

In spite of these constrictions, however, Edward’s accounts and the reports of ambassadors do indicate an active and ostentatious courtly life for the young prince. The French ambassador reported that he sparkled with diamonds, rubies, pearls, emeralds, and sapphires and was generous with his gifts. He maintained at least five painters (one a woman) who painted scenery for court revels.32

There were, however, a few notable instances in which the Revels Office registered palpable hits. The king, like many boys, was fond of martial displays. At Shrovetide 1548, John Stowe records a castle-storming “to shew the King the manner of Warres wherein hee had great pleasure”; and in June of 1550 Edward, Lord Clinton, and the new admiral of England staged a water tournament at Deptford, which Edward enjoyed enough to describe in detail in his journal. Here we see a clear relationship between politics, current events, and entertainments—for the water battle was appropriate both to Clinton’s position as well as to the crown’s recent refurbishment of the Calais defenses, which Edward also describes with relish in his diary; surely naval encounters and the security of Edward’s French possessions were fresh in his mind.33 Ironically, his mother, Queen Jane, had seen a similar water fête during her own procession through London, though the fight between two galleys had to be stopped when one of the mariners drowned.34

But the most splendid and most expensive revels of Edward’s entire reign came at Christmas in 1551 and 1552, when the custom of appointing a “Lord of Misrule” was revived after a hiatus of almost fifteen years in the person of George Ferrers, originally a member of Thomas Cromwell’s household and perhaps, therefore, acquainted with John Bale.
Including a Christmas play, a tournament, a dialogue of Youth and Riches (perhaps by Thomas Chaloner), and a banquet of a 120 dishes, the revelers also saw Ferrers come “out of the mone” and participate in a “drunken Maske” as well as a mock-combat on hobbyhorses.

But most important (and most appalling) was his burlesque entry into London. Just after the 1 December trial of Protector Somerset, and just before his 22 January execution, Ferrers (no doubt under the influence of the duke of Northumberland, who had replaced Somerset as the chief power in Edward’s Privy Council) organized a massive procession through the city, the participants in baldrics of yellow and green (traditional fools’ motley), which included a mock beheading just before the very real and publicly unpopular beheading of the duke of Somerset. The Revels Accounts preserve complaints from Ferrers that the garments for his noble retinue were not “worthy,” that more elegant clothes would have to be constructed for the nobility who participated, as well as ominous orders for stocks, “a hanging lock for a pair of manacles, xxiii great and small keyes for the ieylers,” nails, a pillory, a gibbet, a “heading ax,” and a “heading block.” Ferrers’s retinue for this macabre revel mirrored the king’s—eight councillors, a cofferer, a master of ordnance, gentlemen ushers, pages, heralds and trumpeters, ambassadors, a jester (probably Will Somers), a juggler, a minstrel (the usual Irish bagpiper), and three dancers.

Grafton’s Chronicle has this to say about the “festivities”:

The Duke beyng condemnpned as is aforesayd, the people spake diuersely and murmored against the Duke of Northumberlande, and against some other of the Lordes for the condemnpnation of the sayd Duke, and also as the common fame went, the kinges maistie tooke it not in good part: wherfore aswell to remoue fond talke out of mennes mouthes, as also to recreate and refreshe the troubled spirites of the yong king, it was devised that the feast of Christes Natiuite, … shold be solemnly kept at Greenewiche….

This Christmas being thus passed and spent with much mirth and pastime, wherewith the mindes and eares of murmerors were meetely well appeased, according to a former determination as the sequele shewed, it was thought now good to proceede to the execution of judgement geuen against the Duke of Somerset touching his conuiction and attaynder of the felony afore mentioned.

Whether the king was ultimately appeased and amused by the mockery I cannot say, although his journal seems fairly cold-hearted. He reported simply that “[t]he Duke of Somerset had his head cut of apon
Towre hill betwene eight and nine a croke in the morning”38 and neglected to mention that the people dipped their handkerchiefs in the “good Duke’s” blood as souvenirs of his martyrdom. In Edward’s defense, the journal is generally fairly “objective”—more a record of events, lapsing only infrequently into detail or personal perspective. Edward is also reported to have said, when asked for a reprieve for one of Somerset’s alleged co-conspirators, “How is this, my Lords? There was no one to beg for mercy for my uncle—and for this man you all come.”39 Whether Northumberland actively sponsored Ferrers’s elaborate Christmas revels as a distraction for a depressed nephew remains a mystery since the revels was a civic production, an entry that would be under the control of London authorities. It is difficult to believe that King Edward himself mocked the exposure and execution of his uncle, traitor or no. The chief charge against Somerset had been that he was intriguing to have Northumberland killed (surely a tempting prospect); later, Northumberland’s own rather disgraceful actions at Edward’s death (when he forced the marriage of his son Guilford to Lady Jane Gray, only to send all three of them to the block when Mary’s forces prevailed) certainly indicate that he was quite capable of endorsing, if not designing, this macabre charade.

The following Christmas was also celebrated with great expense, almost as if the previous year’s revels had created an appetite, though whether Edward’s or Ferrers’s is a good question. Ferrers’s long and very self-important letter outlining his plans and requests for the twelve days of his reign certainly indicate that he was enjoying the power of the role and was taking a personal interest in design—the best evidence we have from Edward’s reign of an individual creator. In a passage that would frighten the wits out of any stage designer, Ferrers suggests that he “cum oute of a place caulled vastuum vacuum, the great waste, asmoche to saie as a place voyde or emptie withoute the worlde where is neither fier ayre water nor earth and that I haue bene remayning there sins the Last yeare.” In no other court accounts have I found this concept of continuity—that the audiences would retain memory of Ferrers’s function the previous Christmas and accept his mystical reappearance from a cosmic “holding pattern.” As such, the conceit reminds us of a contemporary serial, with arcing narrative and “to be continued” finale. This structure also
recalls Edward’s own coronation revels, which were taken from the same sort of *vastuum vacuum* where they have been holding for one hundred years. Recycling revels appears to be an aesthetic as well as a concrete enterprise.

FERRERS continues: “Againe how I shall cum into the courte whether vnder a Canepie as the last yeare, or in a chare triumphall, or vppon some straunge beast that I reserve to you. But the serpente with sevin heddes cauled hidra is the chief beast of myne armes.” He calls for a masque of Turkes, a challenge to be performed with hobbyhorses, with another “noble” retinue, this time including “a divine, a philosopher, an astronomer, a poet, a phisician, a pothecarie, a M[aster] of requestes, a sivilian, a disard, two gentlmen vshers besides luglers, tomblers, foole, friers and suche other.” Oddly, this procession also included mock executions as well as children dressed as fools, which forces me to give Northumberland some benefit of the doubt. Perhaps what Ferrers is suggesting here is more akin to the mock executions and rebirth of the sword plays or wren boys of the folk tradition, certainly appropriate to the season. The sword plays, at least those that survive, frequently include dragons (famously crying “In come I, the fiery dragon …”), Turks, hobbyhorses, and Worthies in battle. The season ended with an elaborate Twelfth Night “triumph” of Cupid,⁴⁰ a throwback to Henry VIII’s courtly allegories that seems fairly inappropriate for the young king.

The last series of revels, postponed because of the king’s illness and finally produced at Easter (Edward died in July), seems even less appropriate. This series included again a “play of the state of Ireland”; a play by John Heywood, who had written extensively for Henry VIII; a masque of Greek worthies and satyrs; a masque of Cats (constructed, apparently, with real cats’ tails); apes playing giant bagpipes; and a masque of tumblers for whom hollow upside-down bodies were created so that the masquers could appear to be walking upside down. It is the final masque that gives me pause, for the accounts record a masque of “deaths,” the players costumed with two-faced masks showing men’s heads combined with death’s heads, their shields decked with dead animal heads.⁴¹ Surely this was shockingly unsuitable for the season or for the king’s health. Perhaps it would have played better at Shrovetide, when the Mardi Gras spirit and Lenten *memento mori* would have prevailed.
The King's Interluders were also active entertainers at court. Edward's players were touring within seven months of his accession; as the prince's players they traveled extensively right up to the point of his father's death. The King's Players continued to tour the provinces during his reign, as did troupes patronized by eight of his privy councillors, including Thomas Cheyney, Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports; Edward Seymour, Lord Protector; and William Parr, marquess of Northampton, though the latter may have been attached to the dowager queen's household. These players, traveling mostly in the southeast within easy reach of court, "extended the court to the provinces thereby creating a shared knowledge base and an immediate yet informal channel for locally reinforcing Council policies and authority." It is interesting that the touring pattern is focused and generally avoids the midlands and the North—where Catholic interests were stronger and the prince's arm not quite so threatening.

What might these players have been performing? Once again we are left with mixed signals. John Bale, author of vitriolic anti-Catholic plays for Cromwell, had returned from the Continent. And Nicholas Udall, who had no trouble cutting his conscience later to write Respublica and Ralph Roister Doister for Queen Mary, wrote commendatory verses to the king.

Three surviving plays from the Edwardian period affirm what we have suspected of theater for some time—that the stage was as much a polemical battleground as was the council chamber. As Paul Whitfield White has said, these plays "reflect the reception of Calvinism. Edwardian interludes such as Lusty Juventus (c.1550) and The Life and Repentance of Mary Magdalene (c.1550) preach theology of irresistible grace and spiritual conversion, in contrast to the doctrine of works and free will found in the more traditional moralities and saints plays that supplied the dramaturgy for Protestant theatre." He also has pointed out the youthful demographics of Edwardian population, the newly instituted grammar and choir schools, and the consequent emphasis on educating youth (by both adult and children's companies) in the period. Jacob and Esau, Lusty Juventus, and Nice Wanton all address matters specific to the reign of a boy-king reformer. All three portray radical if not revolutionary displacement of negligent adult authority by
youthful righteousness. In *Jacob and Esau*, the firstborn is (perhaps like Henry VIII) an arrogant wastrel. Virtuous Jacob, with the approval of God, usurps his elder brother in a transparent allegory of the wishes of the Protestants seizing power from Henry’s more conservative Anglicans.

_Nice Wanton_, a chapel play probably performed at court,\(^{45}\) also emphasizes generational conflict, resulting in the child Barnabas (clearly a model for Edward, even referred to, as was Edward, as a “Solomon”) trying to reform his corrupt mother Xantippe as well as his siblings Dalila and Ismael. In another uncanny parallel in history, one sibling, presumably Mary, is damned, while the other, presumably Elizabeth, is redeemed. A virtuous adult character, Eulalia may represent Edward’s stepmother, Catherine Parr, and there are other Protestant guides like Hugh Latimer, Lord Protector Edward Seymour, and Duke John Dudley of Northumberland.

_Lusty Juventus_ once again portrays an older generation misled by false religion in battle with Good Council and Knowledge, reformers who urge Juventus to cast aside the influence of parents in favor of study and prayer. Certainly such portrayals of the usurpation of adult (and parental) authority would not have trod the boards in the days of King Henry VIII. Henry’s “youth” plays (such as *Magnyfycence, Mundus et Infans*, and *Youth*) show, rather, young noblemen taught to mend their ways by the steady influence of the circumspect and virtuous adults who advise them—a structure that creates a dynamic protagonist. In the Edwardian plays, by contrast, the youth, the model of the king, is virtuous _a priori_ through his divine knowledge and Protestant fervor and remains a static representation of the former’s unremitting zeal.

These plays are, of course, comedies with the typical vice characters, high spirits, and clowning of the moral interlude so that Edward’s young taste for boisterous fun would be fulfilled within the moral lesson. Other entertainments for Edward’s court, as we have seen, show a similar dual interest—either uncomplicated entertainment or didactic and fairly transparent polemical debate that reinforced and restated his function as Protestant savior.

This brief investigation of Edward’s entertainments leaves me with as many questions as I began. The evidence seems to indicate that the
prince’s tastes and abilities were indeed considered in the selection of his entertainments, but also that the adults around him used the revels, as they used every opportunity from lessons to sermons to council meetings, to suggest political and religious agendas. They certainly flattered the boy, self-centered no doubt by nature and nurture, but also used theater to reflect and refract policy, as did all the Tudor entertainments.

Most biographers agree that Edward was an enigmatic, perhaps inscrutable character. Poor little rich boy? Protestant genius? Chronically ill and helpless puppet? Flower of England? Cold-hearted prig? Whatever the psychological profile, it is clear that by the end of his short reign, those in power hesitated to cross a king who was capable of signing death warrants for his closest relatives, who made his religious philosophies quite clear, and who would, in a few short years, attain his majority.\(^46\) Would his revels have then matured into the magnificence of his father’s court? Or would they, like his beleaguered sister Mary’s, remain low-key and respectful? It is tempting to overlook Edward’s reign in comparison to the awesome presence of his father and sister. However, the reality may be quite different. Christopher Morris has observed:

It is scarcely adequate to put into a parenthesis the years which first rooted the Protestant religion … restored to the clergy their apostolic married state … confirmed the English in their hatred of foreign interference … tested the constitutional engine constructed by Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell and proved that it could survive reckless driving and could even survive being put into reverse. The England of these years was also the England which first heard the cadences of Cranmer’s Prayer Book and the unmuffled voice of Latimer. It was an England which experienced under Somerset the first government to attempt social justice and also, under Dudley, the first government to allow quite naked exploitation by the nouveaux riches. It was too an England which … survived … the worst financial crisis of her history.\(^47\)

Edward’s court calendar reflects all this quite well, actually, in spite of the dearth of dramatic text. The Revels Accounts and his own writings indicate that regardless of who created the revels, they frequently expressed the Weltanschauung of Edward’s complex and all-too-short years.

Lafayette College
NOTES


5 Starkey, ed., The English Court, 7, 19.


7 Frederick Madden, Privy Purse Expenses of the Princess Mary, Daughter of King Henry the Eighth afterwards Queen Mary: With a Memoir of the Princess, and Notes (London: William Pickering, 1881), 47.


10 Edward VI, Literary Remains, 2:319, 325, 334.

11 Ibid., 1:xlv.


14 Reprinted in Edward VI, Literary Remains, 1:ccxxviii–ccciii.
15 For a full examination of the coronation pageants, see Anglo, Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy, 283–95.


17 Edward VI, Literary Remains, 1:cccxc.


19 Edward VI, Literary Remains, 1:ccxiv. The expenses for the mount, including the gilding and repairing of ropes and branches, are recorded in Documents Relating to the Revels at Court in the Time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary (The Losity manuscripts), ed. Albert Feuillerat, Materialien zur Kunde des alten englischen Dramas 44 (Louvain: A. Uystpruyyst, 1914), 3, including the gilding and repairing of ropes and branches. The mount was likely a set piece with the Revels Office, since the device was used constantly throughout Henry VII's reign (as a pun to his name "Rich mount" = Richmond) and continued to be a stock set-piece through Henry VIII's years.


21 Ibid., 26; W. R. Streitberger, Court Revels, 1485–1559, Studies in Early English Drama 3 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 184.

22 Feuillerat, ed., Documents Relating to the Revels, passim.


25 Ibid., 73.


27 Letters and Papers, 19.2.726.


29 C. C. Stropes, William Hunsis and the Revels of the Chapel Royal (Louvain: A. Uystpruyyst, 1910), 58, 64; English Court Music, 7:422–23; Streitberger, Court Revels, 208–10.

30 Anglo, Spectacle, Pageantry, and Early Tudor Policy, 302.

31 Murphy, "The Illusion of Decline" 122, 125.

32 Jennifer Loach, Edward VI (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 142–46. Loach's chapter "Edward's Court" outlines a typical year's entertainments and explores the king's interest in music, hunting, and sports.


36 Feuillerat, ed., Documents Relating to the Revels, 59, 67, 72, 79; Streitberger, Court Revels, 198–99.


38 Edward VI, Literary Remains, 2:390.

39 Chronicle of Henry VIII, ed. Hume, 219; Calendar of Letters, ed. Bergenroth, also implies that Edward was appealing for Somerset’s life while Northumberland continued to persuade the king that his uncle was too dangerous to live (10:389).


46 We see one example of Edward’s influence in Northumberland’s abrupt change from alliance with conservatives and counter-reformation tendencies to close alliances with Cox, Cheke, Cooke, Hooper, and other intimates of the king, who were radical reformers (W. K. Jordan, Edward VI: The Threshold of Power [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970], 28–73).